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ABSTRACT

This report, based on a survey of 215 junior colleges, describes the junior college and its educational objectives. Concentrating on the teaching of English, customarily described as a remedial course patterned after high school grammar and composition courses, the author probes for strengths and weaknesses in the junior college curriculum. General suggestions for the improvement of the two-year college and the teaching of English are furnished. (RL)

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The Two-Year College & the Teaching of English

by Albert R. Kitzhaber

A Report of the Incoming President of the National Council of Teachers of English to the Executive Committee, November, 1963

The Two-Year College and the Teaching of English

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First Vice President

National Council of Teachers of English

November 1963

Certainly one of the most remarkable phenomena of American education at the present time is the two-year college. Whether called "junior college," "community college," or just plain "college," this kind of institution has multiplied until it now makes up more than a third of all the institutions of higher education in this country and enrolls about one-fourth of all the college students. Its growth, especially in the last twenty years, has been spectacular. This is particularly true of the publicly supported two-year colleges, which, though they outnumber the independent two-year colleges by not quite two to one, enroll seven times as many students. In 1940, for example, there were only 178 publicly supported junior colleges enrolling 168,000 students. In 1962 there were 426 enrolling 713,000 students. Public and private junior colleges today number over 700 and enroll (as of October 1962) 819,000 students, full-time and part-time. Much of this increase has been in special and adult students (from 21,000 in 1936 to 385,000 in 1962). But enrollment of regular full-time students has increased at a rate at least as fast, partly because our population is expanding rapidly; partly because the growing complexity of our society is making further education or training beyond the high school necessary for an ever larger part of the population; partly because the four-year colleges and universities have been unable to expand staff and facilities fast enough to meet the increased demand for higher education and so have been forced to become increasingly selective.

Two-thirds of the full-time students say, at the time they enter, that they intend to transfer at the end of two years to a four-year institution. Without exception, these young people are required to take at least a semester and usually two of freshman English; and, if they are still around the second year, they usually take at least one course in literature. The "terminal" students, those who do not intend to transfer to a four-year college, seldom take a separate course in literature but nearly always are required

to take one or two terms of a special kind of freshman English. Even among the part-time students, English courses, especially ones in writing, are often selected.

In the light of these circumstances, therefore, it is clear that the state of English teaching in the nation's two-year colleges must be a matter of pressing concern to the entire English teaching profession, and in particular to the National Council of Teachers of English, as the largest and most comprehensive professional organization in our field. We should inform ourselves of the number and kinds and quality of the English courses being offered in these institutions, the quality of the teaching in these courses, and the conditions under which instruction takes place. We need to see whether there is something the profession and the Council ought to be doing to help in this enormous and complex enterprise--to identify whatever problems may exist, then to assist in working out solutions. But before we can form accurate opinions of these matters, we must know something about the junior college itself, as a unique kind of educational institution, with problems and obligations that are, for the most part, unprecedented.

The author of a recent authoritative study of the two-year college has remarked: "No unit of American higher education is expected to serve such a diversity of purposes, to provide such a variety of educational instruments, or to distribute students among so many types of educational programs as the junior college."[1*] Even a casual examination of a handful of junior college catalogs will more than bear out the accuracy of this statement. Most of these institutions list in their catalogs at least five or six distinct functions. For example, a junior college in the Midwest says that it undertakes to provide (1) first and second year work in liberal arts and preprofessional fields for students intending to transfer to four-year institutions, (2) one-year or two-year technical programs in business education and industrial education for terminal students, (3) two additional years of general education beyond the high school for those who wish it, (4) day and evening courses intended principally for adults of the community who wish to enroll part-time, (5) guidance and counseling services to help students, whether youngsters or adults, to make wise career choices, and (6) a variety of other educational services to the community, including such things as furnishing speakers, organizing institutes and programs, and preparing reading lists. It is, as a matter of fact, this wide range of services offered in response to community needs that has caused some of these institutions to change their names from "junior college" to "community college."

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*Notes are printed on the last page of this report.

Undertaking to do so many separate jobs presents obvious difficulties, but the difficulties are increased by the radical differences that exist between some of the jobs. Consider, for example, the implications of undertaking to serve, in one institution, the needs of students who plan to transfer at the end of two years to a standard academic curriculum at a good state university; and the needs of students who seek two-year terminal training in automotive services, electronics, industrial management, merchandising, printing, or secretarial work. All these curricula exist in the same California junior college, which also provides one-year programs in vocational nursing, stenography, and clerical work, as well as apprenticeship programs in the construction trades. As a result of trying to reconcile these different obligations and be fair to all their students, many two-year colleges precariously teeter along a tight wire, trying to avoid, on the one side, a policy of failing students wholesale; and, on the other, an equally ruinous policy of compromising academic standards to a point where grades given by the college bear little resemblance to those given for the same level of work at four-year institutions.

Another fact to bear in mind is the degree of college aptitude shown by junior college students. Teachers and administrators in the four-year institutions have been noting a slight but steady and encouraging rise in the quality of their entering freshmen over the last several years. No one in the junior colleges has so far been heard to have marked a similar rise in the quality of junior college students. Junior colleges, at least the public ones, are open to anyone with a high school diploma--and, if an applicant does not have a high school diploma, he still may be admitted at the discretion of the admissions officer. Furthermore, though undoubtedly some good students enroll at junior colleges,[2] the proportion seems to be relatively small; the average level of academic ability in junior colleges is low. Medsker, in his book on the junior college, refers to a Minnesota study which reported that in the state's ten junior colleges 40 percent of the entering men and 35 percent of the entering women had been in the bottom half of their high school graduating class.[3] At San Jose Junior College, a test of college aptitude given in 1956 revealed that, although 7 percent of the college's students had scores above the eightieth percentile on a national scale, 42 percent scored below the twentieth percentile.[4]

The problem is aggravated by the reluctance of most entering students to identify themselves as "terminal" students. Because of the prestige that we as a nation have placed on "college education" (almost regardless of the kind or quality of college), about two-thirds of the young people who enter junior colleges declare that they are planning to move as juniors to a four-year institution, and they accordingly enroll in the academic curriculum intended for "fransfer" students. The results often are unhappy all around. Only a third survive the two years and actually transfer to a four-year

college. And meanwhile there is a ruinous attrition. At San Jose Junior College, for example, of all students in college at the end of the spring semester 1956, 30 percent were on probation, and 77 percent of these were enrolled in the transfer curriculum.[5] This is even more startling than it seems, because, try as they may to maintain grading standards equal to those of four-year institutions, most junior college teachers will freely admit that their grades even for transfer students are generally higher, probably as much as a whole step. But in spite of this, and in spite of a fairly relaxed probationary policy (most junior colleges do not put a student on probation until his grade point average falls below 1.5--D+), a great many students somehow do manage to get put on probation, and a drastic shrinkage in enrollment occurs between the freshman and sophomore years. In October 1961, for instance, there were 192,000 full-time freshman students in the nation's public junior colleges but only 88,000 sophomores. As Clark says in The Open Door College, "The public junior college tends to be a classification and distribution center from which large numbers of students leave education after a relatively short stay."[6]

In apprais ing the overall quality of education offered in the junior colleges, one must of course give much weight to the quality of the faculty. For a variety of reasons, junior college faculties are likely to bear a closer resemblance to high school faculties than to those of four-year colleges. Many of them (64 percent according to Medsker) are themselves former high school teachers. This is not surprising, since more than three-fourths of the public junior colleges are controlled by some branch of the local school government, which extends most of the policies and attitudes of the schools into the junior colleges as well. These include not merely the insistence that junior college teachers meet cerfification requirements (thus almost necessarily forcing their recruitment from the schools), but also opposition to granting professorial rank to junior college teachers, indifference or even hostility toward research and publication (on the grounds that such activities are "divisive"), distrust of merit pay and a preference for granting flat increases according to years of service and course credits accumulated. Tenure, which is regarded more as job security than as a safeguard to academic freedom, comes almost automatically, usually with or just after the fourth year. As in the schools, classes are large--thirty to thirty-five is common in English composition; and teaching loads are heavy--eighteen hours is customary for lecture subjects like English, twenty-four and even thirty for vocational subjects. In addition, compulsory chaperoning of student social affairs and advising of student clubs are considered a normal part of the teacher's duties. High administrative offices in many junior colleges are held by former directors of vocational education in the local school system, people who, in spite of other merits, rarely have an understanding of the goals and nature of higher education and whose

attitude toward the humanities may be at best uncomprehending, at worst unfriendly.

In view of these conditions, it is scarcely surprising to find few teachers with doctorates on the faculties of junior colleges. An analysis of the faculty rosters of twenty-one randomly selected junior colleges shows only 6.6 percent of the teachers holding doctoral degrees, one-fourth of these being Doctorates of Education. Moreover, two-thirds of the doctor's degrees (forty-two out of sixty-two) were concentrated at five of the twenty-one colleges.[7]

It is against this background of awareness of what the two-year college is, what it is trying to do, and what the conditions are under which it tries to do it that we must view the English curriculum in this kind of institution. If we fail to take this background into account, we run the risk of oversimplifying and otherwise distorting what is really a very complicated matter.

Before turning directly to a discussion of English in the junior college, let me first say a few words about the sources of my information and their obvious but unavoidable limitations. I did not use questionnaires, partly because I have an irrational distrust of their reliability (based perhaps on recollections of how I have sometimes filled out other people's questionnaires in the past), partly because I suspect I do not know how to frame or to use a questionnaire intelligently, partly because a committee of the Council has already sent out several formidable questionnaires of thirty to forty pages each to the junior colleges, and I felt that the market might not bear another. Instead, I wrote personal letters to the presidents of 215 two-year colleges, public and private, throughout the United States. I asked for a copy of the college catalog and for syllabuses or other detailed descriptions of the English courses offered. Not quite half of the letters (43 percent) received some kind of answer. Some presidents sent letters promising catalogs and syllabuses which never came. Some sent catalogs but forgot the syllabuses; some sent syllabuses but forgot the catalogs. Only a little over a fifth (22 percent) sent both, though this made an adequate sample. From these I selected twenty colleges representing twelve states, with a proportionally larger number from California to take account of this state's well-known preeminence in junior colleges. Thirteen of the colleges are located west of the Mississippi, seven of them east. All of them are publicly supported. From a close analysis of the catalogs and syllabuses of these twenty colleges, I gathered the information that I will present below.

In spite of the smallness of the sample, the information is, I think, as accurate as this kind of analysis will allow. All the basic patterns of course types and requirements had appeared and had begun to repeat before

I came to the twentieth college. But we all know that academic requirements and course descriptions in catalogs may be at least a year behind current practice; and both these descriptions and the syllabuses are likely to represent someone's notion of the ideal more than they do the grubby facts of day-to-day operation in the classroom. This kind of information needs to be verified and when necessary corrected by personal visits to the colleges and conversations with teachers and administrators. This, unfortunately, I was unable to do. But from having made a similar study of freshman English in universities not long ago and verified my analysis by such personal visits, I would expect the information in the junior college catalogs and syllabuses to be accurate in the main as descriptions of current policy and practice. What one does not find out from such sources are the various difficulties that arise in trying to carry out policies or to teach courses in certain approved ways--though some of these may easily be surmised.

At any rate, I present, with honest diffidence, this partial view of English teaching in a small but, I think, representative selection of two-year colleges. It identifies problems and raises questions and thus, I hope, serves its purpose.

Junior colleges, like four-year institutions, almost invariably require some sort of instruction in the use of English for all students intending to take a full course of study, whether in the terminal or in the transfer curriculum. Only a few highly specific vocational programs may sometimes be excepted, such as those for chefs, machinists, diesel mechanics, and the like; and in most colleges even students in these programs are obliged to take some English. The particular kind of English course required varies a good deal from school to school--hardly surprising in view of what we may tactfully refer to as the lack of unanimity with regard to freshman English courses in four-year colleges and universities. But because the clientele of junior colleges shows such a wide range of academic aptitude and vocational interests, freshman English within a single institution often takes on several distinct forms to meet the needs of the several kinds of students. In most four-year institutions, remedial (subfreshman) English composition seems destined soon to disappear because the need for it is fast being removed; fewer really bad writers now show up at these colleges. In the two-year colleges the situation is painfully different. The kinds of students who used to populate the remedial English classes at state universities, and who have recently found themselves barred or discouraged from enrolling there, are now attending junior colleges instead, where they are either accepted with philosophic fortitude (especially if the college has become large and prosperous and secure) or welcomed with highminded statements about democratizing higher education (especially if the college is new, small, and ambitious). The junior colleges not only teach remedial English; they often teach

sub- (and sometimes sub-sub) remedial English; and once in a while they teach what might be called advanced remedial English in the sophomore year. Besides, they nearly always have two distinct sequences of required freshman English, one for transfer students, the other for terminal students; though sometimes the courses for the terminal students are identical with the remedial English courses, in which case the word "remedial" is avoided and a euphemistic name is substituted--Developmental English, Refresher English, or, my favorite, Special Repair English.

Decisions as to the level of English course a student should enroll in are made on the basis of the usual placement tests, sometimes supplemented by an essay. Decisions as to the particular variety of course (when the option exists) are made on the basis of counseling and the student's own declared vocational intentions. Thus at some junior colleges a terminal student majoring in some aspect of business may be put into a course called Business English, and a future electronics technician into one called Report Writing.

With the evidence I had available, it was not possible to discover the percentage of students put in remedial English, in regular freshman English, or in the somewhat infrequent advanced or accelerated sections for the better students. One college did, however, supply this information. There the bottom 20 percent of entering freshmen are placed in a three-hour, year-long communication course, the level of which can best be described as subremedial. The next 30 percent are placed in a five-hour, one-term course that is prerequisite to regular freshman English, though a grade of C or better is required to pass a student into the regular course. (A student in the subremedial course, incidentally, needs a B to get into the remedial course, which he must take and pass with a C if he wishes to take the regular year-long course in freshman English that is required for graduation in the transfer curriculum.) Terminal students may meet the English requirement by passing the three terms of the subremedial course or the single five-hour remedial course. The upper 50 percent of entering freshmen at this college go at once into the regular freshman English sequence, which is a three-credit, year-long course.

In this example can be seen one of the most widely used methods of trying, on the one hand, to keep student morale in the terminal program at a reasonably high level and, on the other, to maintain acceptable academic standards in the transfer program. The remedial courses at this college--and at the great majority of others--yield credit commensurate with the number of hours of class attendance and are graded generously, but the credits and the grades are not transferable to other colleges. At many junior colleges, indeed, the subremedial course does not even count toward graduation from the junior college but is merely prerequisite to the remedial course, which does count toward graduation in the terminal curriculum.

The remedial course, especially the first term of it, serves, whether by design or not, as a screening device to separate out those students whose low interest or low ability makes it impossible for them to survive even in the terminal program. At one college, for example, a teacher reports that, by the third quarter of the remedial course, enrollment is scarcely more than half what it was at the beginning of the first quarter. This task is not a fair burden to place on any course, but there is a clear precedent: the four-year colleges have long used freshman English, both remedial and regular, for exactly the same purpose.

The fact that remedial English in the junior colleges does help to do the screening is all the more eloquent when we consider the modest level of attainment that is expected of students in the course. At a junior college in the Pacific Northwest, according to a teacher on its staff, students at the end of the first term "must be able to achieve the eighth grade level on standard tests in both reading and spelling." A California college uses an eighth grade textbook for its subremedial course, a tenth grade textbook for its remedial course. Both are workbooks. The syllabus advises teachers of the first semester remedial course to grade "only for correctness in the conventions" and adds, "Only those who reach a level of performance of no more than three or four gross mechanical errors per page receive a 'C' for the Course," a grade that allows them to pass into the second semester remedial course. A junior college in New England has an impressive catalog description of its remedial course: "A course to help students to develop skill in organizing material and expressing thought in clear, interesting, and forceful standard English." But the same college's syllabus shows that in practice the college will settle for a good deal less: the first objective of the course, according to the syllabus, is "to produce a complete unified composition in one paragraph"; and the third is "to assist students to gain skill in making a single unified impression through orderly arrangement of a few simple related ideas." Behind both of these statements one senses a quiet desperation. A junior college in Alaska makes no secret of its attitude toward the remedial course given there; the course, says the catalog, confers "three high school credits."

The content of the overwhelming majority of these courses is mechanical drill of the most stupefying kind--endless workbook exercises on correct usage, study of spelling lists, punctuation rules. It is curious that, although the futility of such activity has been demonstrated annually in the student's experience since the seventh grade, most junior college English teachers try the same nostrum yet once again--and of course with the same barren results. In some courses no connected writing at all seems to be required. In most, students are drilled in basic sentence structure and, sooner or later, are led to compose single paragraphs. A few colleges have rebelled against the pattern. At one of the liveliest, a teacher writes that, after trying the usual drill with scant success, "we decided that we could not do in a term what the

high schools cannot do in four years and it was senseless to subject these people to more grammar and more drill, especially since the workbook exercises seem to have almost no effect on their writing." The new course concentrates in the first term on developing fluency, with little attention to mechanical errors; most students attend concurrently a two-hour laboratory session to improve their reading ability, but they are not given a grade for this work. In the second and third terms, the course emphasizes "organization, purpose in writing, and clear thought processes."

At another junior college in the same part of the country, the subremedial course, intended mainly for terminal students, is one in communication. This course, which runs for the whole year, represents a frank acceptance of the fact that skill in written English and mastery of conventional correctness in usage will not be vitally important to future welders, automobile mechanics, machinists, and TV repairmen. But as voting citizens they will need to know how to read critically, even if nothing more than newspapers, and to think clearly enough to come, as often as possible, to rational conclusions about what they hear on radio and television. The first quarter course therefore tries to develop study skills; the second, communication skills (a few short papers are written); and the third, ability to evaluate the mass media.

A limited amount of experimenting is being done with the methods of teaching remedial English, usually some combination of large lecture sections and small laboratory sections. The junior college just referred to has started this year to use (in its remedial, not its subremedial course) the new materials developed by Edwin Peterson of the University of Pittsburgh. These materials, an ingenious combination of lectures and transparencies for use with an overhead projector, are being tried in sections of 100 students. The smaller laboratory classes are using a programed textbook on grammar and usage. A California junior college is also experimenting with large lecture and small laboratory sections in remedial English, though the lectures are presented in the customary way. As can be surmised, efforts like these are usually intended as much to teach students more cheaply as to teach them better.

The regular courses in freshman English are not much different from those found in the four-year colleges and the universities; that is to say, they are in pretty bad shape--confused, unimaginative, low-level. Perhaps the major difference between these courses in the two-year colleges and those in the four-year institutions is that in the former there are usually two sequences of freshman English, one for terminal students and the other for transfer students. There is an effort to pattern the latter as closely as possible on the comparable freshman course in those colleges to which most of the students will transfer.

Freshman English in the junior colleges, as in the four-year institutions, is still a catchall. Besides the customary (and legitimate) work in grammar, rhetoric, usage, and literature, we find instruction stipulated in study skills, library orientation, research technique, and, in the words of one syllabus, "educational and vocational orientation." The first semester course usually concentrates on expository writing and reading; the second usually contains a selection of literature, most often organized by types. The textbooks are the same as those found in the four-year colleges, except that often one can detect what appears to be a studied preference for selecting the most difficult and prestigious--Locke, Gibson, and Arms, Toward Liberal Education; Martin and Ohmann, The Logic and Rhetoric of Exposition; Perrin, Writer's Guide and Index to English; Connolly, A Rhetoric Casebook; and other books of this level. One may question the wisdom of this procedure, since these books, though excellent, are not easy to use well, and many state universities find them too difficult for their average freshman classes.

The amount of writing required varies widely, from as little as 2,000 words a semester to 8,000-12,000, which one California junior college syllabus specifies for the first semester. The average quantity of writing for the first semester is perhaps 3,500-4,000 words--about what it is in most four-year institutions. In the second semester, where the study of literature takes up most of the time, the total number of words is about the same; fewer papers are written, but they are somewhat longer. A research paper is commonly required, usually 1,500-2,000 words long, but it may be in either semester. Nearly all the syllabuses require a definite number of papers to be written impromptu in class. The reason for this policy is no doubt the same as in state universities; the desire to have a certain number of papers that the teacher is absolutely certain are the product of the student's own unaided labors.

Many of the first semester courses in the regular freshman English sequences begin with the customary "review of grammar and usage." This kind of preliminary ritual has declined sharply in the freshman English courses of four-year institutions, as entering freshmen have shown a somewhat better background in these matters. The persistence of the review in the junior colleges is no doubt in part a reflection of the lower level of competence in English that characterizes most junior college students. But it may also reflect the conservatism of many junior college English teachers, who carry over to the college freshman classroom the attitudes and practices that they found comfortable for so long in the high school classrooms that they have left.

Nearly all the grammatical instruction in the freshman English courses of junior colleges appears to be of the traditional sort. There is little sign

of any descriptive study of grammar, except for the occasional adoption of one of the currently fashionable language readers. An exception is a junior college in the Midwest, which is using Roberts' English Sentences (a high school text) in its remedial course.[8] A modest amount of instruction in logic appears in some of the courses intended for transfer students.

A few junior colleges require not only instruction in English composition but also a course in speech. The kind of communication course that gives formal instruction in speaking is fairly common--much more so than in four-year institutions--though speech seldom bulks very large nowadays in the total course; usually only one or two speeches are required. This kind of course seems much less frequent in the junior colleges now than it was at the height of the general education movement some fifteen years ago. It lingers in the junior colleges today partly perhaps because the general education philosophy is still stronger there than it is in most of the four-year institutions. But its decline has probably been due chiefly to the earlier decline of the course in the four-year institutions and the consequent reluctance of the latter to accept for transfer the credits from an integrated course which always is difficult to evaluate; officials have trouble deciding what fraction of the course credits should be assigned to speech and what to English.

It is of some interest that a few junior colleges apparently have enough above-average students to justify offering a special advanced or accelerated sequence of freshman English--although one should not entirely rule out the possibility that this may sometimes be only another instance of the strong desire among many junior colleges to enhance their status by indiscriminately copying features of the four-year institutions. At any rate, these courses, like their counterparts in the four-year schools, emphasize literature and the preparation of library papers. One of them begins the first semester with some work on semantics and proceeds to a study of twentieth century literature by types, with occasional writing assignments based on the reading; the second semester is a humanities course. Another college, which offers accelerated freshman English for bright students, uses one of the language readers in the first semester, along with a book of essays and a novel. Students are required to take simultaneously a special one-hour course in use of the library and in research technique; they are supposed to write sixteen papers during the term, several of them presumably calling for documentation. The second semester course is one in literature, with fewer but longer papers required, all of them source papers.

The elective courses in English in two-year colleges, though often fairly numerous, are seldom very interesting. They are usually conventional, likely to be almost exact copies of sophomore courses in the four-year colleges--a segment of undergraduate education that so far has managed to escape the rigorous critical examination that it has long needed.

These elective courses may be grouped in four categories: remedial and, in the current euphemism, "developmental" skills courses; miscellaneous nonliterary courses; courses in literature; and humanities courses. Some junior colleges offer elective courses in spelling improvement and vocabulary building; but virtually every junior college offers at least one and often two special courses in reading. The usual practice is to call the one for the semiliterate student the remedial course and that for the more sophisticated student the developmental course. The ability to read well is, all in all, a much more serious problem for the average junior college student than the ability to write well. It is probably the lack of sufficient skill in reading that, more than any other academic circumstance, causes the high rate of dropouts among junior college freshmen. Hence the major emphasis on training is reading, both in composition courses and in special elective courses. At least one junior college, however, has become discouraged over the problem. A teacher at this college writes that "...after fifteen years of offering a reading lab course, we discontinued the course because our records showed that over the years more than 50 percent of those assigned to the course failed to graduate."

Among the miscellaneous electives offered are courses in creative writing, which is very commonly found; business English and technical report writing, though sometimes these are offered outside the English Department; English as a foreign language, in those parts of the nation, like California, where considerable numbers of students may be enrolled whose native language is not English; and, only once among the twenty colleges studied, a course in advanced grammar, tagged for prospective English teachers.

The majority of elective English courses are, not surprisingly, ones in literature. The curriculum for terminal students, however, specified little or no work in literature or the humanities; this is true not just of the programs for such crafts as welding and industrial machine operation but also of programs in business and engineering. The only exposure to the humanities that terminal students get may be whatever literature has been put--sometimes bootlegged--into the required remedial or regular freshman English courses. But students in the transfer curriculum are nearly always required to elect work in the humanities or in the humanities and social sciences considered together as a single field. And although it is sometimes possible for a student to take a course in art or music or foreign language or even sociology to fulfill his humanities requirement, the great majority appear to elect courses in literature.

The most commonly found literature course is the kind based on the "types" approach. The titles of such courses usually begin with the words, "Introduction to." A single types course may include some study of all the

principal literary genres--poem, play, novel, short story; or there may be separate courses in each of the genres--Introduction to Drama, Introduction to the Novel, etc.

The second most frequent kind of literature course in the junior colleges is the survey. Two are almost invariably found--the English literature survey and the American literature survey. Both are likely to be year-long courses and to concentrate on major figures or major works. A survey of contemporary literature is also often found; and when it is offered, the English and the American literature surveys usually stop at 1900. A third popular kind of survey is one of world literature, always a masterpieces course, sometimes lasting two semesters, sometimes only one. Usually it is in the English Department, but it may also be found occasionally in a special Humanities Department. The only "figure" course offered is, as might be expected, one in Shakespeare.

Separate courses called Humanities are still fairly common in the junior colleges, but now they are less often integrated courses in literature, art, music, architecture, history, philosophy, than conventional courses in world literature--Greek tragedy, The Inferno, Don Quixote, Faust, Crime and Punishment. It seems likely that the integrated course is on the decline in the junior colleges for the same reason that brought it to an end in most four-year colleges: the difficulty of adequately staffing it. Though such a course is fine in theory, it takes a genuine virtuoso to unify such diverse matter and to make it meaningful to average (and below-average) students. When taught by one person, the course has often been superficial. When several specialists have been employed in a "team" approach, the result has often been not a single large course but several small ones, each bearing little relation to the others.

Although this survey of junior colleges and the teaching of English in these institutions is obviously limited in scope, it presents enough evidence to enable us to identify a number of serious problems and raise several troublesome questions.

First are those that arise from the junior college itself as an educational institution. There can be no doubt that American education must provide some agency or agencies to do the jobs that the junior college has accepted. If these things did not need doing, the junior college could hardly have flourished as it has. But one may wonder whether most junior colleges as now constituted and administered can effectively do all the work they have undertaken, or at least do it without creating dangerous side effects that may imperil the integrity of the whole junior college movement.

Junior colleges usually come into being as a result of a combination of specific local needs, civic pride and ambition, and a frank desire to get college education at economy rates. A major local industry that employs large numbers of certain kinds of technicians may support a junior college with the expectation that the college will train a supply of these technicians which the firm can draw on. Or the Chamber of Commerce and other civic groups, mindful of the favorable associations that surround the word "college," and conscious of the social and economic advantages that follow from the mere fact of college attendance, may feel it important for their young people that they have, close at hand, a chance for high education. Or, aware not only of the value of college education but of its high cost as well, local groups may support a junior college simply because it is cheaper to run than a four-year institution and cheaper for the students who attend it. This last consideration is probably most often the deciding factor. It is of some interest to note that the official motto of a junior college in the Midwest is not couched in resonant and highminded Latin--"Veritas," perhaps, or "Vox Clamantis in Deserto"--but rather is stated in plain businesslike English: "Highest Excellence at the Lowest Possible Cost."

These are all defensible, perhaps admirable, reasons for founding a junior college; but, when complicated by the characteristic American habit of confusing training with education, they create a kind of institution that is faced from the outset with contradictions and difficulties. Is it possible, for example, in the same institution to do full justice both to the young man who wants to become an automotive mechanic or a chef and the young woman who wants to become a teacher of French or a research biologist? Or, more generally, can a college transfer curriculum (education) and a trade school curriculum (training) exist side by side in the same institution without one unfavorably affecting the other? I think the answer may perhaps be yes to both of these questions, but only if extraordinary care is taken. (I will say more on this head in a moment.) At present, we often see students in the terminal curriculum laboring unsuccessfully in academic courses that usually are based on a mistaken assumption about their future needs (the freshman English courses are usually the most vulnerable in this regard); and we often see students in the transfer curriculum lulled into false security by grades that may prove woefully out of line with those given for comparable work at the universities they transfer to. Worst of all, we often see students who ought to be learning to become good salesmen or printers or typists struggling futilely instead to gain a baccalaureate degree they neither need nor are able to get. I certainly do not mean to belittle the terminal student or his importance to our country. We need welders as well as doctors, electricians as well as English teachers. But the future welder or electrician is ill served by a system that induces him to enroll in a course of study he cannot master, that raises in him false expectations,

and that demands of him the wrong things and delays his entrance into a congenial vocation, and then only at the cost of earlier frustration and failure in something else.

The second class of problems and questions arises from the relation between the public junior college and the public schools that control three-fourths of them. As I have suggested earlier, the principal result of public school control of so many junior colleges has been to extend into the junior colleges some of the least desirable features of the schools--excessive work-loads, unevenly prepared staffs, low professional status for teachers, often an unintellectual if indeed not an anti-intellectual atmosphere. Under such conditions, no academic course can be taught as well as it deserves. And a junior college English teacher with six classes of thirty to thirty-five students each is just as unable to teach English composition seriously as a high school teacher is who has the same load. We have long deplored such conditions in the public schools but have failed to realize that they often exist in the junior colleges as well.

I know little about problems of taxation and of financing schools and colleges. But unless it would really be prohibitively expensive, would it not be better educationally to break the public junior colleges loose from school control? One suspects that the present arrangement is largely due to administrative convenience and probably some economic advantage. But it seems to me that its disadvantages educationally far outweigh these other concerns. The public junior colleges are a unique kind of educational institution. They will have the best chance of adequately performing their complex functions if allowed to operate with enough independence to work out realistic ways of dealing with the unprecedented problems that face them.

The third and last group of questions and difficulties grows from the relation of the junior colleges to the four-year colleges and the universities. What has been the influence of the four-year institutions, and has it been good or bad? As far as the terminal student is concerned, I would say without hesitation that the influence has been almost uniformly bad. This is not surprising, since ordinarily the four-year colleges and universities would have little direct contact with this sort of student and could not be expected to know much about him and his special problems. At any rate, the four-year institutions, acting on the assumption that something calling itself a college is engaged, as they are, in higher education, have tried to impose their standards on the junior colleges, to the detriment of the terminal student. The four-year institutions are culpable in their failure to recognize clearly that the junior colleges enroll students with two distinct sets of aims, and that courses and standards appropriate for one are not necessarily so for the other. This problem has nowhere been more apparent than in the

English curriculum, where the tendency has been to assume that a mastery of the conventions of correct usage is equally important to the future banker and the future plumber. The colleges and universities are to blame also to the extent that they have helped to encourage, or at least failed to disavow, a negligent--almost a contemptuous--view of the young people who are or ought to be in the terminal curriculum, a view that sometimes infects the thinking of teachers of academic subjects in the junior colleges. Finally, the junior college system itself is at fault for often making it so easy for students with little or no college aptitude to enroll in the transfer curriculum, where they soon meet with frustration and then drop out of school.

The influence of the four-year institutions on the transfer student and his course of study has been mixed. As far as standards are concerned, the colleges and universities have every right to do what they can to insure that the young people who come to them as juniors, having taken the lower division courses at a junior college, have been held to standards consistent with those of the four-year institutions. One cannot quarrel with that, and one can understand their concern over the difference in standards that exists so generally now.

The colleges and universities may be criticized, however, for their smug assumptions that their own freshman and sophomore courses are without stain or blemish and that all the junior colleges need do to achieve academic respectability is install these same courses on their own campuses. This is often exactly what happens. And in fact at the kind of junior college that is a lower division branch of the state university, the freshman and sophomore courses of the university are simply established without change on the branch campuses. Those junior colleges that have some choice in determining their own curricula have in general been too subservient in this regard to the four-year institutions. In part, they have been unable to help themselves, since the colleges and universities can always hold over them the threat of refusing to accept course credits. But certainly the lower division courses in the four-year institutions are not beyond criticism, and indeed the criticism is long overdue.

Let me now conclude by offering a number of suggestions that will serve to summarize what I have been saying about the two-year college and the teaching of English in this kind of institution. I will list first some suggestions dealing with general matters arising from the junior college itself, then follow these with suggestions pertaining to the teaching of English specifically.

General

It seems to me that it would be better ideally to separate the transfer and terminal functions of the two-year college and serve each in a separate institution, one calling itself "college," the other calling itself perhaps "institute." As a practical matter, however, it seems quite clear that, except in the rare instances in which such an arrangement has already been anticipated, the two-year college will remain a multipurpose institution, serving both terminal and transfer students. The pattern is already too firmly established for us to look for a general change, even if we were all agreed that such a change were desirable. This being so, the following cautions may be relevant.

1. In the administration of the multipurpose junior college, both the academic and the vocational philosophy should be fairly represented. That is, as an institution serving both vocational and academic needs, a junior college should be directed by a president and deans who, between them, understand and are able to represent effectively both the claims of vocational training and of academic education. This sounds perhaps self-evident and superfluous; but at present a considerable number of junior colleges are run entirely at the top echelons by vocational education specialists who have been transferred in from public school systems.

2. Courses in the transfer curriculum should be taught by college level teachers as far as possible, not by teachers who have simply been moved into the freshman and sophomore college years from the senior high school without regard to necessary professional qualifications. If work that is genuinely of college level is to be offered in the transfer curriculum, as it must, it is unrealistic and unfair to expect such teaching from teachers who lack the professional background to offer it. That is, teachers in the transfer curriculum should have some claim to a scholarly grasp of their subject. I do not mean to suggest that all teachers in the freshman and sophomore years at the universities are scholars, nor to deny that many high school teachers have at least as much professional competence as many teachers of lower division courses in college--and sometimes more. But it is important to differentiate the work of the transfer student in the two-year college from that which he has taken earlier in high school; only a genuinely competent teacher, conscious of college standards of work and able to impose them with confidence, can offer the kind of courses needed and teach them as they must be taught.

It would be too much, however, to expect that the junior colleges will be able to attract a substantially larger proportion of teachers with doctoral degrees than they now have on their staffs. The number of teachers with

doctorates is increasing, but not in proportion to the increase of college enrollments. Competition for every new Ph.D. will become increasingly keen, and these people will continue as at present to go predominantly to the four-year institutions.

The best hope of raising the scholarly level of junior college faculties in the transfer curriculum would be to create a new teaching degree, one demanding perhaps as much graduate work in the major field as the present doctorate but not requiring a dissertation. If such a degree could be established and achieve respectable status as a terminal degree, it might do much to upgrade the quality of junior college faculties..

3. The people who teach academic courses to students in the terminal curriculum should of course be competent in their subjects, but they should have a keen awareness of the different objectives of these students as compared with those who plan to transfer to a four-year institution. Teachers accustomed to teach academically oriented students would almost certainly set up the wrong expectations for terminal students and in the long run do perhaps more actual harm than good, however commendable their intentions. Good high school teachers, accustomed to deal not only with college preparatory students but also with those whose abilities and ambitions lie in other directions, would probably be the best kind of faculty to recruit for the terminal curriculum.

4. An institution combining both terminal and transfer functions should be constantly on guard against the danger of overemphasizing the "practical" on the academic side of the curriculum. That is, the college should recognize that the transfer curriculum is not to be justified on immediately and obviously practical grounds but rather on the grounds that it provides the elements of a liberal education. The purpose and justification of the transfer curriculum, in other words, is education, not training.

5. The multipurpose two-year college should also be wary of the opposite danger--that of forgetting that academic success is only one kind of success, and it does not apply in the same way to all the students enrolled in such an institution. That is, students in the terminal curriculum do not have precisely the same educational needs as those in the transfer curriculum, even in subjects that both must study. The terminal student should be offered courses in keeping with his needs and special abilities. This need is clearly evident in English.

English Instruction

Finally, let me offer a few suggestions for improving the teaching of English in the two-year college.

1. Better teachers, and better prepared teachers, are needed in English as in the other academic subjects in the junior college. But even the best teachers would be unable to perform effectively in the conditions that now prevail in many junior colleges. Class size in English courses, especially composition, should be reduced to a level comparable with that in good four-year colleges; if possible, it should be reduced to no more than twenty students per class. The total number of classes assigned a teacher should also be reduced to the equivalent of a teaching load in a good four-year college--certainly no more than twelve class hours a week, and no more than nine of these in composition.

2. The policy, now general but by no means universal, of establishing separate English sequences for transfer and terminal students should be continued and extended. There are some junior colleges which, on the dubious theory that they are being "democratic," lump both terminal and transfer students together in the same English classes. To me such a procedure seems quite the opposite of democratic and, almost inevitably, serves one or the other group ill.

3. The freshman English course for terminal students should take account of the special needs of these students and, in consequence, pay less attention to formal drill on matters of conventional correctness than to clarity of thought and statement. I am suggesting, in other words, a drastic revision of most of the English courses offered terminal students, an abandoning of workbooks and an emphasis instead on developing reading ability and that power to discriminate among conflicting ideas that is essential to responsible citizenship. I am not suggesting that no training at all in composition be offered or that correctness be totally disregarded; I do suggest a reversal of emphasis, with writing and correctness in a subordinate position--<u>for these students only</u>.

The freshman English course for the transfer students, suffering as it does from the same disabilities as the comparable course in four-year institutions, is in need of a general overhauling. I suggest a course in which large quantities of good expository prose are read and analyzed, frequent writing assignment based on this reading and analysis are made, some study of rhetorical principles (for the most part derived from the analysis of prose models) and of the elements of logic is undertaken, and all written work is carefully and competently marked and graded, then returned promptly to the authors for revision and correction. I would argue against the usual "review of fundamentals," except in sections of remedial English that enroll transfer students. And there such a review should be selective, not a mechanical progress through the eight parts of speech, the four kinds of sentences, the three kinds of clauses.

5. For both terminal and transfer students, I think it is becoming critically important that the humanities, especially literature, be taught far more effectively than they are today. With the enormous increase in leisure time, and the prospect of even more leisure as automation becomes general, it is extremely important that American young people learn to occupy this leisure in more active and satisfying ways than many adults now do. We already enjoy more leisure than any people on earth has ever had before. It will be tragic if we fritter it away in trivial pursuits that foster apathy towards intellectual matters and hostility to mental exertion.

The junior colleges, enrolling an ever larger proportion of American young people, have a heavy responsibility to teach the understanding and enjoyment of good literature to all their students, doing a much better job than most junior and senior high schools have done in the past and better than many four-year colleges as well.

NOTES

1. Leland H. Medsker, The Junior College: Progress and Prospect (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1960), p. 4.

2. "Good" in the usual sense of showing aptitude for academic learning. It is important to remember that junior colleges are not intended to serve only this kind of student. They enroll many young people who are unquestionably "good" at learning other things--skills and trades, for example, such as welding or computer programing or stenography.

3. Medsker, p. 32.

4. Burton R. Clark, The Open Door College: A Case Study (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., 1960), p. 50.

5. Ibid., p. 76.

6. Ibid., p. 85.

7. Obviously, mere possession of a Ph.D. provides no certain guarantee of good teaching. But the degree is at least some assurance that the holder has studied his subject with considerable thoroughness and knows more about it than is in the freshman or sophomore textbook that he is using. Probably we can all agree that good teaching, regardless of the subject, requires that the teacher know thoroughly what he is teaching. There are other requirements too, but none so basic as this one.

8. Paul Roberts, English Sentences (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1962).